DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 225 176 CS 207 328

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TITLE	Expanding the Freewriting Heuristic.
PUB DATE	Nov 82
NOTE	12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association (Atlanta, GA, November 11-13, 1982).
PUB TYPE	Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Instructional Improvement; *Instructional Innovation; *Prewriting; *Sequential Approach; Teaching Methods; Two Year Colleges; *Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS	*Freewriting; Heuristics

ABSTRACT

Freewriting can be more than merely a prewriting heuristic that provides preparation for more advanced kinds of writing. A class at Jefferson Davis State Junior College (Alabama) attempts to promote the lack of pressure as well as the freedom and spontaneity that freewriting allows to a traditional composition course. In this class, freewritings are the major source for instruction in all areas of composition. Focused freewriting topics are presented daily in a deliberate sequence designed to move students from the personal to the outside world. This sequential approach balances the freedom of freewriting with the discipline of traditional methodology. Several guidelines--counting ideas, jotting down supporting details, examining word choice and verb tense, summarizing the thesis in a sentence, and using the journalistic heuristic--help move the students from freewriting to first draft. With the course structured according to the traditional elements of composing, the students' freewriting serves as the source of examples at every stage, from word choice to the entire composition, without any stigma of "right" or "wrong." (JL)

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Expanding the Freewriting Heuristic

I hope it is no longer necessary to argue for freewriting as a valid and immensely useful prewriting device. Ken Macrorie and Peter Elbow's work alone should be sufficient to demonstrate its usefulness. More recently some freewriting advocates have provided substantial theoretical support for freewriting as a useful prewriting heuristic. Barrett Mandel and James Kinney, in particular, have cited reasons why freewriting is an excellent technique for helping students generate ideas, and they have provided sound arguments that freewriting may allow writers to tap the rich but often hidden material in the right hemisphere of the brain.[1]

Unfortunately too many writing instructors still claim that freewriting and other intuitive heuristic exercises produce only personal writing, too self-centered and introspective, and thus of little use in academic or real-world writing. Others admit the value of freewriting as a warm-up exercise to generate ideas but see it as co-equal in usefulness to other prewriting probes. Not a great deal has been done to advance freewriting beyond its prewriting exercise stage or to reconcile its inherent chaos with the discipline and structure needed for an acceptable finished product. And yet, unlike some of the structured prewriting techniques such as tagmemics, with its nine-part grid, the reporter's formula with its six questions, or the Pentad with its five categories, freewriting places no boundaries or restrictions whatsoever on a writer's thinking. Even so, most writing teachers who use freewriting at all continue to use it only as an early-in-the-term exercise to prepare students for more serious writing, and most

CS207328

textbooks which discuss freewriting at all abandon references to it after an early chapter.

Recently I have undertaken the task of trying to reconcile freewriting to traditional instruction in composition by combining elements of both in a first course in writing for students in a two-year college.[2] For several years I had used freewriting successfully as the customary warm-up exercise in a traditional course. Students responded well to it for all the reasons documented by its advocates--the removal of the pressure to get-it-right-the-first-time, the defeat of writer's block or the freeze-up tendency, and the generation of new and unexpected ideas on a topic.

A number of years' work with two-year college students, who are generally unpracticed and unsophisticated writers, convinced me that all the virtues of freewriting, especially the lack of pressure and the freedom and spontaneity it allows. could be more than simply the beginning point for writing instruction. If students responded well to freewriting in the first few weeks of a term, why not try to maintain that enthusiasm and willingness-to-produce throughout an entire term? Why not try to integrate the freewriting fully into a traditional approach to composition, one with which students were comfortable from previous instruction, and try to reconcile the two approaches in some compatible way?

To accomplish this goal, I used daily freewritings as the major source for instruction in all areas of composition to help students move from the initial freewritings to first drafts and finally to structured and polished essays. First off, I devised an extended series of focused freewriting topics for each class meeting. I designed the topics in a deliberate sequence to move from the introspective and personal to the world outside the writer and into the realm of ideas and abstract thinking. I then asked

students to freewrite daily in a spiral notebook on the designated topic which I gave them at the beginning of each class.

In-class freewritings began with assignments such as a ten-minute focused freewriting on the student's first impressions of the college, a freewriting on how the student anticipated spending the weekend on a Friday, followed on Monday by a freewriting on how the student actually spent the weekend, a freewriting entitled "How I learned to drive," and one on "How I feel about cheating in school." Assignments then moved beyond the writer to people ("My best friend," "The previous teacher I most remember," "My least favorite relative"), to places and events ("My favorite place to be alone," "Main street in my home town," "The most exciting event in my high school career," "A recent test"). Finally freewritings focused on the world beyond the writer ("ERA," "A current social issue") and abstract topics such as "Loneliness," "Cheating," "Social Injustice."

By focusing freewritings on specific topics and by sequencing those topics in a deliberate pattern designed to move the writer from introspective subjects to world-centered topics, I attempted to use freewriting in the way instructors normally sequence their writing assignments from simple to complex in both structure and ideas. By freewriting on focused topics exclusively, students were not wildly throwing down various ideas about any and every subject, but they were given the freedom of unrestricted thinking on a very specific subject. By carefully sequencing those subjects to deal first with what the writer knew best (her personal experiences) and then moving gradually to less personal experiences and more difficult subjects, I tried to frame the freewriting within a traditional and accepted methodology of teaching writing to balance its freedom with some degree of discipline and make it more meaningful than simply unfocused freewriting, which though

it can lead to fluency and new ideas, can also produce chaotic rambling on too many different subjects to be of value to most writers. The focused subjects and sequenced pre-arrangement of those subjects imposed an order and structure normally lacking in freewriting. Yet the method kept all its virtues--freedom and spontaneity, unrestricted thinking on a given and specific subject--without any of its major faults--total chaos on many subjects and lack of depth on any one idea.

Once the students had a freewriting on a given subject, I used several techniques to help them move from it to a first draft for an essay. Sometimes it was effective enough to ask students simply to re-read a freewriting and use it as the basis for a first draft of an essay on the given subject. Sometimes it helped to have students examine a freewriting closely and freewrite again on the same topic, trying to generate additional ideas, Peter Elbow's familiar center of gravity technique. More often, however, what helped students was a series of questions or guidelines I devised, some similar to the kind James Moffett has suggested, to apply to their freewritings. Here are a few examples:

1. Count the number of distinctly different ideas in your writing and make a list of them. Is any one a new idea, one you discovered while writing? Could you develop a paragraph around any or all ideas?
2. Jot down any specific details or examples which you can use to support your ideas.
3. Examine your word choice. Did you use any words that surprised you? Any you like? dislike? Did you use any unusual phrasing?
4. What verb tense appears most frequently in your freewriting. It can indicate your focus as you wrote.

5. Express in a sentence the argument (thesis) of the freewriting if it has one. If it does not have a clearly stated assertion about the topic, does one emerge as you re-read? What additional details are needed to support your thesis?
6. Use the reporter's formula on your freewriting. Does this suggest additional ideas on your subject? Does it give needed focus or offer a new direction for you to consider?

Specific guidelines for examining a freewriting such as these proved helpful to students trying to move from an initial freewriting on a focused subject to a first draft for an essay. The re-examining process itself, with these kinds of aids, was often generative, sparking additional thinking on the subject which produced new ideas, the recursive feature of the writing process at its most productive. After this "study" and close examination of a freewriting, both for what it contained and for what it could further help produce, students wrote a first draft for an essay based on their work with the initial freewriting.

Once the students had a first draft of their papers,they were, in essence, at the familiar first draft stage of most students in a first writing course. The difference, however, was that the first drafts of these students were, as a rule, more fully developed with evidence of deeper and more complete thought on a subject than those of students who had used no prewriting heuristic or had used one of the more structured heuristic techniques. Certainly the production of the first draft proved considerably easier to write when it came from a focused freewriting on the subject.

For classroom instruction on the elements of composing, I divided this course into segments common to many traditional composition textbooks,

beginning with diction or word choice, progressing to the sentence level, then the paragraph, and finally to the whole essay. Although students wrote complete essays throughout the term, classroom instruction in writing dealt with the elements of composing from smallest to largest, from word to sentence to paragraph to the combination of paragraphs. My rationale for this procedure was that the two-year college student's word and sentence level problems may be extensive, and these seemed the most appropriate areas with which to begin discussions about composing for this particular group. Small units are also more manageable for unpracticed writers, and success with small items can give the confidence beginners often need before moving to larger levels.

In every case, the students' freewritings from their notebooks were the sources for examples of composition elements discussed in class. For instance, during the discussion of the appropriateness of word choice in writing for various audiences, students surveyed previously written freewritings for examples of slang, for clichés they tended to overuse, for occurrences of jargon, and their examples were the ones used in class discussions of diction.

Because of its very nature freewriting is the student composer at her most natural and spontaneous level of language usage. Therefore freewritings tend to contain what is normal and natural for a writer to produce. By examining their word choice in its rawest form, students often realized for the first time in a painless way that they tended to overuse slang or jargon or certain trite expressions, that they too often relied on the same words over and over. Freewritings were not "judged," only culled for examples. These examples were always treated as "in process" examples of writing in its primitive, evolutionary stage, and students always provided them voluntarily. These examinations of freewritings for diction allowed students to see what

needed attention when they later wrote first drafts based on their freewritings. And because what was examined was a freewriting, the stigma of "right" or "wrong" usage was removed, for freewritings, as one student put it, "weren't supposed to be any good anyway."

During the discussion of variety in sentence word order, students surveyed their freewritings to see how they arranged their sentence patterns and actually used examples from their freewritings to practice different syntactic patterns. When attention in class turned to sentence combining exercises, students went to their freewritings to practice combining sentences in them for more syntactic maturity. In these ways the freewritings became an integral part of each day's instruction in the elements of composing. Most examples were student-produced, and students always worked on their particular material and not on mass-produced examples from a textbook. As a result they responded much better to exercises and were eager to share their examples and to see what their classmates had produced.

Likewise, during the discussion of paragraph development and the need for adequate support of general statements with concrete, specific details and examples, students surveyed their freewritings for under-developed ideas and unsupported generalities to fortify with additional details, a perfect place to locate a good idea in need of support. Exercises calling for expressing a freewriting's main point in one sentence proved useful in conveying to students the concept of a topic sentence, as well as helping them understand the principle of thesis statements and how a good thesis can give direction to any essay.

In short, the daily freewritings which students compiled proved useful at every stage of composition instruction. Every student produced a large corpus of material from which to draw appropriate examples of the elements

of the composing process throughout its many stages. Moreover, students seemed quite willing to take a freewriting and re-work it into a draft for future use.

This approach could offer possibilities other than the one I have described here. Other writing instructors might design a sequence of focused freewritings in any order on any focused subjects they might choose, and they might well begin at any point in composition instruction, not as I did with the word and sentence, but with larger units and with more advanced discussion of organizational patterns and stylistic devices.

What I discovered with this approach was that freewriting can be more than merely a prewriting heuristic with little benefit other than a "get ready to write" exercise in preparation for more advanced kinds of writing. Freewriting can be more than an exercise to produce fluency, though indeed it does so. It can and did provide a foundation for an entire first course in composition in which freedom and discipline could be reconciled; opposites could become compatible. Freedom and spontaneity were suitable beginning points to initiate content for what eventually became the structured essays all teachers want their students to produce. I discovered that students could learn to willingly suspend order and discipline until ideas were fully formed and developed. This does not mean that order and discipline were dispensed with entirely, merely delayed until a first text was generated, until as Sondra Perl maintains, "retrospective structuring, the feature of composing that is writer-based, has generated an initial text."[4]

Current investigations of writers at work continue to indicate that a first draft, once produced, can provide the impetus for further writing and thought on a subject, that re-reading of what is <u>first</u> written helps

shape what will follow, helps generate additional ideas on the subject, helps writers re-define initial intentions, and that few writers know exactly what they will eventually produce when they begin writing.[4] Yet for the inexperienced student writer getting that first text is itself often an intimidating and monumental undertaking. Our tasks ought to be to facilate the process whereby a first text can be produced and then refined through multiple revisions ideationally, stylistically, and mechanically until it has suitably evolved, developed and matured, and been made ready for readers.

It has not yet been proved that freewriting can lead to demonstrably better student writing; what research there is is inconclusive and conflicting.[5] Yet my work with freewriting has indicated that students are more receptive to it as a method of producing a first text for school writing than more common and traditional beginnings. And I have a strong feeling that the mere physical act of moving a pen across paper is a much more powerful stimulant to thought than anyone realizes. Such freedom to begin, to practice and make trial, may not be a way acceptable to all experienced writers, but to the beginning writer, to those who through previous schooling have come to believe that first writing must always be good writing, free-writing proved highly successful. Allowing the unpracticed writer the freedom to compose initially does not mean that every first writing will continue to be chaotic. As writers become more sophisticated, their first writings will become more sophisticated; as turning thoughts into words on paper becomes a more common practice, students can move from beginning with freewriting to other methods of getting started which require more discipline and more complex strategies.

But for those for whom getting started is the first and most basic writing block, freewriting can offer a way not around this block, but

a way to destroy it completely. Focused and sequenced freewriting with systematic procedures for moving from it to additional writings did lead my students to more effective writing, and I hope I have suggested something others might like to try by expanding the freewriting heuristic to suit their particular goals in writing classes.

Notes

[1]Barrett J. Mandel, "Losing One's Mind: Learning to Write and Edit," CCC, 29 (Dec. 1978), 363-68; and "The Writer Writing is Not at Home," CCC, 31 (Dec. 1980), 370-77. James Kinney, "Classifying Heuristics," CCC, 30 (Dec. 1979), 351-56.

[2]Harold Mark Reynolds, "The Design and Testing of a Focused and Sequenced Free Writing Approach to a First Course in Composition for Two-Year College Students," Diss. Carnegie-Mellon University, 1981.

[3]For additional guidelines see Mark Reynolds, "Make Freewriting more Productive," CCC, forthcoming.

[4]Sondra Perl and Arthur Egendorf, "The Process of Creative Discovery: Theory, Research and Implications for Teaching," in Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition, ed. Donald McQuade (Akron, OH: L & S Books, 1979), p. 131.

[5]Linda Flower and John R. Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing," CCC, 32 (Dec. 1981), 365-87.

[6]In addition to my own research cited above see also Thomas L. Hilgers, "Short-term Training of College Composition Students in the Use of Freewriting and Problem-Solving Heuristics for Rhetorical Invention: A Comparative Evaluation," Diss. University of Hawaii, 1980; and Nancy Rabionski, "Systematic or Unsystematic Invention Instruction: Which is More Effective for a Student Writer?" Buffalo: State University of New York, 1980. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 192 326)